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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001590

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SUBJECT: GBRV ARRESTS MAJOR DRUG TRAFFICKER/MAYORAL
CANDIDATE

REF: A. DIA REPORT AUG. 30 2007 S-119 883-07/CNT
1B. CARACAS 1545

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Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Daniel Lawton,
Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (S/NOFORN) Summary. GBRV authorities arrested three members of the powerful Makled family, one of Venezuela's most notorious drug trafficking families, following a November 13 raid of Walid Makled's farm that reportedly netted 392 kilos of cocaine. With November 23 state and local elections less than a week away, brother Abdla Makled (aka Abdala) had been running a well-financed campaign against the candidate of Chavez's PSUV to become Mayor of Valencia, Venezuela's third largest city. The Makled family, owners of Caracas based Aeropostal Airlines, have long been suspected of moving cocaine by air and sea to Mexico (REF A) and are believed to work predominantly with the Sinaloan Cartel. While the timely arrest of three members of the Makled family lets the GBRV act tough on drug traffickers, it also has the added, intended bonus of eroding an independent power base that could have potentially challenged Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) just days prior to state and local elections. End Summary.

The Makled Arrests

12. (S/NOFORN) Venezuelan police authorities arrested three members of the powerful Makled clan November 14 after authorities raided a warehouse on a farm belonging to at-large brother Walid Makled Garcia (aka "Compa" and "Turco"). GBRV authorities arrested brothers Abdla and Bassel Makled, along with family member Alex Jose and known associate Erick Jose Echegaria following the November 13 evening raid. Although Walid Makled's whereabouts are unknown, nearly 400 kilos of cocaine, ten suspects and assorted weapons were captured at his farm outside of Valencia. (NOTE: GBRV officials made repeated, recent requests to both LEGATT and DEA in Caracas for information about the Makleds. END NOTE).

13. (S/NOFORN) In response to the arrests, the Fourth Tribunal of Carabobo State authorized the seizure of businesses, a commercial airline, personal property, real estate, cars, yachts and bank accounts belonging to the three members of the Makled family and their known associates. The Makled brothers are suspected of ordering the kidnapping, torture

and murder of a valued USG informant and are rumored to have bought off members of Venezuela's criminal investigative police (CICPC) as well as the head of the penal court to ensure their protection over the years. The Makleds reportedly worked and cooperated with the Sinaloan cartel of Mexico.

The Makled Mayoral Campaign

¶4. (C) Abdla Makled (often spelled Abdala in local media) has been running a strong campaign to become mayor of the country's third largest city, Valencia. Abdla is closely associated with incumbent Governor and Chavista dissident Luis Felipe Acosta Carlez and was running a well-financed campaign in the upcoming elections on November 23. Although not a member of Chavez's ruling PSUV party, he branded his candidacy "Pro-Chavez" and frequently mimicked the look of PSUV material, campaign style, and even began to develop his own base of political patronage.

¶5. (C) Makled and Acosta Carlez, who is running for re-election in the gubernatorial race, are widely believed to be taking votes away from Chavez's PSUV candidates, handing the opposition an electoral advantage in one of Venezuela's most important states. Known for his lavish election campaign give-aways of food and electrical appliances, Makled's arrest is likely to disrupt the momentum of his candidacy in Valencia. Interestingly, the arrests took place only one day after candidates could withdraw from the race and endorse other candidates. Candidates may still withdraw up to 48 hours before voting, but their names remain on the ballots.

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¶6. (S/NOFORN) Following the arrests of members of the Makled family, among the higher profile assets reportedly frozen by the GBRV was Caracas-based Aeropostal Airlines. Aeropostal halted flights to the U.S. earlier this year, however a Czech carrier has subsequently filed an application with the Department of Transportation (DOT) to fly U.S. routes on behalf of Aeropostal. NOTE: This is known as a "wet lease." END NOTE. In a November 4 meeting with Econoffs, Aeropostal CEO Dr. Mustafa Flores repeatedly denied that the Makled Group, owners of Aeropostal, had ties to drug trafficking (REF B).

Comment

¶7. (C) The Makled family appeared to enjoy relative impunity in Carabobo until family members tried to create their own independent power base at the expense of Chavez's allies in the state. PSUV candidates in Valencia openly complained about Abdla Makled's lavish election campaign give-aways of food and appliances, which were reportedly cutting into the PSUV's electoral base. The arrest of Abdla Makled should effectively end his campaign and diminish the siphoning off of PSUV votes in Valencia. With the Makled arrests, the GBRV appears to have gained the double benefit of cracking down on drug trafficking, while simultaneously eliminating a potential dissident challenge to PSUV rule.

CAULFIELD